THE GENERAL STRIKE BEGINS

The showdown came in the shape of the general strike in October, 1905. No political party had foreseen it or planned it, and none led it. It broke out suddenly, as fire starts in a forest after a long drought. A spark strikes a dry leaf and from it the wind carries millions of sparks to start new fires. It matters little how the first spark originated—from a hunter's smoldering campfire, the butt of a hiker's cigarette, smoke from a speeding locomotive, or lightning. The actual precursor of the blaze is the drought.

The advance scouts of the general strike were walkouts in Moscow. A large printing office opened the round in September. Other printing establishments joined it. Next, bakeries and some factories on the outskirts of the city followed suit. Here and there strikers clashed with the police. Workers in the repair shops of a railroad walked out, protesting against an assault by the Cossacks.

Meanwhile, the meetings in St. Petersburg gave an outlet for the revolutionary energy of the people, replacing other forms of protest. Not until October 2 did the St. Petersburg printers declare a strike in support of their Moscow comrades. This, however, was a minor episode in the political life of St. Petersburg.

Another minor event was the convention of representatives of railroad employees, called by the Department of Transportation to discuss an old-age pension plan. The convention was humdrum at the start, but workers from the repair shops soon replaced the high brass on the platform. Political slogans appeared in the speeches. The convention began to attract the attention of the press, and the authorities threatened to dissolve it. Before any steps were taken, however, rumors that its members had been arrested spread in Moscow, and workers on the Moscow-Kazan railroad walked out in protest. The government promptly denied making any arrests, but nobody believed the denial. On October 7, the whole railroad center of Moscow was paralyzed. St. Petersburg workers who wished to know what was happening in Moscow stormed the evening gatherings at the University. That night, the crowd was so large that we had to hold a meeting in the courtyard. On this and on the next day, telegrams from Moscow and other cities were read from the chair, reports were made from the precincts, separate gatherings of professional groups were arranged. On October 8, I was called to a workers' meeting at the Military Medical Academy, where the question of a general strike was to be discussed. One after another, spokesmen of revolutionary parties rose to speak. Every one of them passionately opposed a general strike. Such a step was pointless, they argued, since it could